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Queer Theory, Late Capitalism, and Internalized Homophobia

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THEORETICAL DEBATES AND INTERVENTIONS

Queer Theory, Late Capitalism, and Internalized Homophobia

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SUMMARY. The emergence of queer theory represents a transformation in the approach to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered peoples. It has claimed new ground for treating sexuality and gender as worthy subjects in their own rights, rather than offshoots of gay and lesbian studies or of general cultural theory. The author contends, however, that it is doubtful that this approach can lead to social change. Queer theory has dismissed the usefulness of the disciplines that were the foundation of the social movements that initiated gay and lesbian studies, such as political economy, and in doing so, it has surreptitiously mirrored the so-

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cial relations of reproduction that constitute late capitalism. This mirroring has had unseen consequences for the individual in society, and with queer theory's insistence on the relativity of experience and the dismissal of identity, has set the stage for a benign reinforcement of internalized homophobia. The author argues that this approach can be mediated by recognizing that identity is fluid, and that by focusing on identifying with social movements rather than centering analyses on the problems associated with identifying as a particular category of status and being, we can refocus our energies on the building and maintenance of mutual support and collective recognition that can lead to resolving the stagnation now dominating attempts to develop coalitions around issues that matter. doi:10.1300/J082v52n01_02 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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The emergence of queer theory during the past decade represents a transformation in our approaches to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered peoples. It has claimed new avenues for treating sexuality and gender as worthy subjects in their own right, rather than as offshoots of lesbian and gay studies or of general cultural theory. Queer theory asserts that inclusiveness requires relativity, and that it is with this perspective that we can free our analyses from fixed, if hidden, meanings and structures of power. I will suggest here, however, that it is doubtful that this framing alone can initiate social change. While gay and lesbian studies developed from the new social movements of the 1960s, queer theory has dismissed the usefulness of the disciplines that they drew on, such as political economy, for analyzing exploitation and inclusion. I will also suggest that the ontology of queer theory, through post-modernism and poststructuralism, surreptitiously mirrors the development of late capitalism and the concurrent ideology of the ego-centered individual. The highlighting of the impossibility (and undesirability) of identification and the relativity of experience closely follows current capitalist relations of production, where the self-contained individual is central to the economic goal of creating profit through production and its by-product, consuming. It is thus my view that the tenets of queer

theory closely pattern those characteristics of late capitalism that it claims to reject.¹

This mirroring of late capitalism in queer theory has unforeseen consequences for the individual in society and has hindered its practitioners from engaging important ways of envisioning collective action. Queer theory promotes the “self” of the individual as an alternative to wider social interaction, disassembling the social ties that bind. Recognizing that oppression and violence, symbolic and physical, are part of the daily reality for those of us who do not correspond to dominant standards is compromised by queer theory’s rejection of the category of identity, and indeed, categories as a whole. The stance that it is limiting to pose categories of behavior and belief, even if those constructs are fluid and changing, puts the individual subject in the position of internalizing thoughts and feelings without the benefit of peer feedback. Too, this aspect of marginality can itself become an identity: if one recognizes and embraces the fact that one is marginalized, there is no need to seek support or to engage social action. It declares that the only way to prevent being overwhelmed by power is to “disclaim” (Butler, 1993, p. 308). But to simply disclaim creates isolation, and, as I will maintain, reinforces internalized homophobia.

Finally, I will propose that a means of mediating the positions asserted by many queer theorists is to conceptualize methods of identifying *with* rather than identifying *as*. In this way, identity can maintain its importance in providing a vehicle for mutual support and as a basis for initiating and maintaining social action, while recognizing that the category of identity is fluid and changes with the consequences of the social world.

THE CROSSROADS OF LESBIAN AND GAY STUDIES AND QUEER THEORY

In their Introduction to the influential *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (Abelove, Barale and Halperin, 1993), the editors acknowledge that their collection conflates gay and lesbian and queer studies, preferring the later but yielding to the then current usage of gay and lesbian as the institutionalized form of study most often recognized by scholars (1993, p. vii). Since the publication of that volume, much has changed. Queer studies and its most influential mode of inquiry, queer theory, has become the institutionalized norm within colleges and universities in the United States, and the discourse of study has refocused attention

from the identity-centered character of gay and lesbian studies to the more reflexive and possibly more inclusive term, queer.

This change has not been accidental. In academic circles in particular, there has evolved a change in direction from the identity arenas in which gay and lesbian studies are based to the postmodern and poststructuralist bases of queer theory, which more often contends that identity is an essentialist category constraining rather than opening up possibilities for the analysis of gender and sexuality.¹² In short—gay and lesbian studies categorize, Queer theory does not.

I have argued (Kirsch, 2000) that this difference between gay and lesbian studies and queer theory is, in part, generational. Gay and lesbian studies developed from the movements for voice and identity that were prominent during the 1960s and 1970s, when many oppressed and de-valued sectors of the population were rising up to claim their place and their validity in society. These assertions corresponded with worldwide movements for independence, where the logic of colonialism was debunked and new regimes demanded that policy and governance be derived from indigenous sources rather than from the dominant powers of colonial mechanisms. Some of these movements, of course, were disappointing. Just as freedom from colonial powers did not automatically dissolve the relationships of power that oppressed groups as well as whole populations, the movements for voice and recognition in the (primarily) Western capitalized countries were not as inclusive as the intentions that drove their growth. It became clear that the dominant social relations of the society-at-large were also in play inside social movements. Women, people of color and those with sexual orientations other than heterosexual ones were often closed out of decision-making processes in organizations that were overwhelmingly dominated by a white and male leadership. Reacting to these differences in recognition, many dissident factions declared these movements invalid. The history of the Students for Democratic Society is but one poignant example of an organization that ultimately dissolved because of struggles over inclusion, voice and direction. Queer theory, while developed by a generation of academics who experienced the tumultuous movements of this period, has primarily been trumpeted by a generation of students that has not witnessed a social movement. Perhaps, too, their attraction is due in part to the queer theory's insistence on the impossibility of identity, and to the reality that our versions of ourselves change regularly and for younger students even more often. The pull of queer theory is often its declaration of independence and of a unique position, what Castells (1997) has referred to as "a resistance identity." These students have not yet

formulated a “project identity,” where, as Castells notes, “social actors, on the basis of whatever cultural materials are available to them, build a new identity that redefines their position in society, and by doing so, seek the transformation of the social structure” (Castells, 1997, 43; Kirsch, 2000, p. 7). Queer theory, then, is a combination of social influences that have taken shape over time by representatives of the academy and a generation that has not actively engaged in social struggle is central to its development. That it has been presented as a radical alternative to gay and lesbian studies is a paradox that will be further explored here in an attempt to elucidate the challenges we now face in countering the recent depoliticalization of the gay and lesbian rights movement.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF GAY AND LESBIAN STUDIES

The tumultuous relations that characterized the movements of the 1960s and 1970s were reflected in the academic disciplines. As Wolf (1972) so aptly noted, academic disciplines and the theory developed within them reflect wider social relations of society, providing modes of analysis that encompass and mirror the existing contradictions and relationships of power. So it was and continues to be in the halls of colleges and universities. During the 1960s and 1970s, discussions of social issues began to encompass the concerns of constituencies that had been excluded from academic theory building. Feminist writers, in particular, changed the landscape of disciplinary directions, reinterpreting classic texts and documenting observations about women in society that had been previously ignored, and in the process forging new ground. Race, sex and class also became central issues as new paradigms were built that included the many categories omitted or secondary in the standard analyses of social life. Fueled by the sexual revolution of the 1960s, and with the Stonewall uprising as the symbolic designation of the beginning of the gay and lesbian rights movement, the attention paid to differences in sexual desire, gender and the cultural construction of gender and sexuality gained prominence in the public sphere and in the academy.

Gay and lesbian studies grew out of the nexus of these movements. The theory building that highlighted devalued populations in the 1970s and 1980s, provided substance for the institutionalization of programs in American colleges and universities. What fueled gay and lesbian studies, as Annamarie Jagose (1998) suggests, was the constructionist view proffered by Foucault that homosexuality is a social, or con-

structured phenomenon. Positing through his *History of Sexuality* (1981) that there were homosexual acts before there were homosexual identities, the position of gay and lesbians became an issue of society and the medicalization of behavior rather than a universalist category of being. This concurred, in approach at least, with the many writings of feminists of the 1970s, particularly those anthropologists who were arguing that concepts of the universality of male dominance needed to be challenged and reevaluated, along with the position of women in the workforce and their role in the maintenance of communities (cf. Leacock, 1972, 1981; Etienne and Leacock, 1980; Nash and Safa 1980; Nash, 1978, 1981; Reiter, 1975; Ross and Rapp, 1997, and Safa, 1981, among others).

While the development of gay and lesbian studies provided a framework for the social basis of categories and their uses in dominant power relations, they also provided a space for the development of *identity* for many faculty, students and others who had previously been bereft of a place in academia to voice their interests and concerns. Identity became a topic that united those that had been isolated and enabled individuals to find comfort and strength in both feelings and numbers. No longer were solitary faculty or confused students left to negotiate their place in their own psychological realm; the structural availability of institutionalized forums lessened the isolation that had been felt by many. Importantly, this recognition made available arenas where individuals could discuss and organize around similar needs and demands. Like the consciousness-raising groups of the feminist movement, programs in gay and lesbian studies were more than academic correlates to discipline-based departments. They were safe-spaces for the personal growth of students and faculty. Academic scholarship also flourished. The demand for gay and lesbian studies grew exponentially during the 1980s, evidenced by the sheer volume of writing represented in Ablove, Barale's and Halperin's reader (1993). But with this productivity in scholarship came new questions about inclusiveness and representation, and thus the story continues.

MAKING QUEER THEORY

Like its predecessor, queer theory was born from the idea that more inclusiveness is better than less. But it holds that the categories presented by gay and lesbian studies are too narrow to encompass the range of behavior and sexuality that is presented by a wide range of preferences. It was also, however, a product of a development of theory

in the academy that rejected modernist notions of identity and representation. Thus, gay and lesbian studies are an area of inquiry, while queer theory is an approach to that inquiry. Gay and lesbian studies have encompassed a variety of approaches, from Marxist and neo-Marxist to mainstream sociology and political inquiry. Queer theory favors the deconstruction of those approaches and the categories that have been developed within them. It is thus a particular perspective on the place of social construction in gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual—in short, those who profess other than heterosexual—norms, and it is this fact of categorical deconstruction that defines its approach.

Queer theory blossomed as a mode of inquiry during the past decade. It is anchored in the post-1960s disengagement with organizational left politics, which arguably did not encompass the concerns of gender and sexuality in their complexities. The failure of the movements of the 1960s and 1970s to significantly include the voices of all of its constituents led to arguments about theory and its representation, and, most significantly, the place of political economy and Marxist theory in the analysis of social conditions. This followed in the footsteps of the European academy, where Marxism lost its prominence in the defeats of 1968. Many of the writers prominent in the postmodernist and post-structuralist movements that are the foundations for queer theory—Foucault, Baudrillard, Derrida, Barthes, Deleuze and Lacan—had been active in the social movements of the 1960s, only to become demoralized by the failure of these attempts to restructure the institutions of social life. The theories of Marx became equated with the reality of the so-called “socialism” of the Soviet bloc and its social oppression. It also became identified with the “meta-narratives”—as Lyotard (1984) called them—of the modernist period as produced by Marx and other writers of the Enlightenment whose theories came to be judged as false, crude and ultimately oppressive. One of the consequences of this perception was the questioning of Marxism as a tool for change that united theory and practice and the social with the individual. Thus, there was a widespread belief that the left had been defeated as a result of the theories that it had engaged.³ With this contention came the concurrent claim that bounded categories of gender and sexuality could not be inclusive, a position, as we have stated, that was fueled by dynamics within the now-rejected left organizations.⁴

Shadowing this development was the questioning of *labor* as the starting point of analysis for social reproduction. Labor movements had failed to make significant differences in the inclusion of suppressed voices, both in their internal organizations and on a societal level. This

failure began to be conceived as a problem not only with labor movements but also with analyses that posited labor as the strategic vehicle for social change. If theory, in the name of the “modern,” had failed to provide adequate methodologies for solving the problems of inequality and exploitation, it was reasoned, then the basis of individual experience and social reproduction needed to be reconceptualized.⁵

With the rejection of Marxist renderings of the social, and more generally, political economy, also came the dismissal of all universalist theory as essentializing human interaction. When the collective as political did not suffice, the personal as political took hold. Class, in particular, became a contested category (cf. Laclau and Mouffe. 1985). It was replaced by *discourse*, which was seen to have a more reflective awareness of the nature of human interaction. Thus Foucault, in his *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), presented the concept of discourse as a way of describing social interaction and regulation, posing *language* rather than labor as the grounds by which processes of thought and knowledge are derived, the way in which *discursive formations* order human experience. The subject, say “tradition” (1972, p. 21), is dismissed as an object of analysis; for the subject, or subjectivity, itself is a result of discursive formation, embodied by individuals but which includes aspects of individual experience as well as excludes them.

Foucault did not create new categories, for discourses themselves are a result of other discourses. In his words:

... these divisions—whether our own, or those contemporary with the discourse under examination—are always themselves reflexive categories, principles of classification, normative rules, institutionalized types: they, in turn, are facts of discourse that deserve to be analyzed beside others; of course, they also have complex relations with each other, but they are not intrinsic, autochthonous, and universally recognizable characteristics. (1972, p. 22)

As further example, Baudrillard discarded the category of labor for the analysis of social reproduction. He referred to a “fetishism of labor” in his *Mirror of Production* (1975), and he dismissed historical materialism and the analyses it creates as both universalist and false. Specifically enjoining the experience of the Soviet Union in the twentieth century, he tells us that “When the structure is reversed and the proletarian class triumphs, as in the East, nothing changes profoundly, as we know, in social relations” (1975, p. 168). Baudrillard instead finds the bases for subversion in the “codes” that are superimposed by the rela-

tionships of power onto the individual. Collective action, we then would assume, would come from the mass rejection of these codes, although how this is accomplished is never elaborated.

For those dissatisfied with the categories of gay and lesbian studies, the introduction of postmodernist and poststructuralist writers were a welcome addition to the debate. What demarcates queer theory from its postmodern and poststructuralist foundations is its referral to a range of work "that seeks to place the question of sexuality as the centre of concern, and as the key category through which other social, political, and cultural phenomena are to be understood" (Edgar and Sedgwick, 1999, p. 321). Hogan and Hudson (1998) place the beginnings of a queer theory with Teresa de Laurentis's use of the term for a 1989 conference at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and cite Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men* (1985) and *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) as the scholarly works most closely associated with its acceptance into academia (1998, p. 491). Certainly the publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) signaled the beginnings of an era that questioned many of the analyses provided by gay and lesbian studies, and the magnitude of her following, complete with dedicated web sites, testifies to the power of her philosophical queries into the nature of gender and its role in present day cultural phenomena.

Queer theory has evolved to encompass any analytic strategy that can be used to destabilize and to deconstruct. We know that queer theorists object to statements that would denote boundaries of any kind. All would seem to agree that the traditional heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy should be abandoned, and that a third or more ways of describing and analyzing sex and gender should be proposed. As Annamarie Jagose puts it, "queer is very much in the process of formation . . . it is not simply that queer has yet to solidify and take on a more consistent profile, but rather that its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics" (1998, pp. 2-3). Other writers have gone further in emphasizing a refusal to take definitional stands. David Halperin suggests that even its designation is suspect, for "Once conjoined with 'theory' . . . 'queer' loses its offensive, vilifying tonality and subsides into a harmless generic qualifier, designating one of the multiple departments of academic theory" (1995, p. 32). There are also some that take the notion of queer outside of the limiting realm of gender and sexuality. Aaron Betsky, for one, explores "queer space" as a "misuse or deformation of a place, an appropriation of the buildings and codes of the city for perverse purposes" (1997, p. 5). The *principle* of queer, then, is the dissembling of common

beliefs about categories in general, from the representation of gender and sexuality in film, literature and music to their placement in the social and physical sciences, to the queering of space. The *activity* of queer is the “queering” of culture, ranging from the reinterpretation of characters in novels and cinema to the deconstruction of historical analyses. As activity, we have seen the assertion of “queer” identity, notably held as lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, and transsexual, as variants of human behavior that have rights on their own terms. As *theory*, queer’s derivation from postmodernism and poststructuralism leads to the rejection of all categorizations as necessarily produced by dominant ‘regulatory regimes.’ It situates the individual as the unfettered *self*, separate from circumstances that would limit its definition.

If the beginnings of queer theory are to be found in the perceived limitations of institutionalized gay and lesbian studies, its momentum has produced a paradoxical effect. While claiming to be more inclusive than its more general area of analyses, it has narrowed the focus of inquiry to the individual self rather than the social field, thus mirroring the development of late capitalism as it has developed during the last fifty years.

QUEER THEORY AND LATE CAPITALISM

As we have suggested, queer theory stems from movements in academic theory that developed after 1968, specifically, postmodernism and poststructuralism. The “post” of postmodernism presupposes something after, beyond what has already been experienced or accomplished. It is both a theoretical and an historical category.

As Eagleton has so succinctly put it, “postmodernity”

. . . has real material conditions: it springs from an historical, ephemeral, decentralized world of technology, consumerism and the culture industry, in which the service, finance, and information industries triumph over traditional manufacture, and classical class politics yield ground to a diffuse range of “identity politics.” Postmodernism is a style of culture which reflects something of this epochal change, in a depthless, decentered, ungrounded, self-reflexive, playful, derivative, eclectic pluralistic art which blurs the boundaries between “high” and “popular” culture, as well as between art and every-day experience. (Eagleton, 1997, p. vii)

In short, then, “postmodernity” is part of what Mandel (1972) has referred to as “late capitalism,” while postmodernism is a reflection of this era. It has destabilized everyday experience and with it the identity politics that characterizes much of gay and lesbian studies. In doing so, it has projected a view of experience and change that is very much in sync with the realities of the dominant ideologies of the present period.

We know that in capitalist societies those in power are in control over the means and rewards of production. They are the same individuals and classes that effect the production of what we call the dominant culture, the nexus of relationships and ideas that condition the way that members of society act in accordance with the rules and structure that govern social functioning. Capitalism has produced the ideal of the individual as separate and self-sustaining, a position that enhances the role of the self in determining consciousness and action.

Mandel (1972) argued that late capitalism is a period where advances in the attempt to increase profit are centered on the use of technology to automate the labor that has historically prevented the unfettered flow of capital accumulation through class struggle. In late capitalist terms, the individual is presented as the basic unit of production, consumption, and indeed, being.

This focus on the individual as labor source and physical unit has produced an ideology in which individuals are viewed, in cultural terms, as successful when they are able to obtain the goods and services that distinguish them from their peers and those with lesser status (Bourdieu, 1982). But ideas do not operate as contained entities any more than individuals do; their genesis is elsewhere, in the social relations of society that provide the foundation for their development. The ideology that rationalizes capital is experienced by the individual as the necessity of furthering personal status. The ability to contribute and to reap the rewards of capitalist relations are dependent on class position and location; the *ideal* that capital presents is the achievement of those marks of status that define the successful individual. Capitalism has focused on the individual as seller of labor power and late capitalism has intensified that focus in both the realms of production and consumption. In turn, sexuality and desire have become massively consumerized. Roland Barthes (1990) showed us that “The Look” is more important than the act itself. But what does this mean on a cultural and on a strictly economic level? The creation of ideal behavior in capitalist societies is basic to social control. Striving to *obtain* commodities fixes energy on the acquisition of things as perceived needs. This of course, does not rule

out a rejection of the creation of need; but it does lead to inequalities that are reinforced by that very act of striving.

The integration of advertising and consumerism into the psyche is a multi-layered process, mediated by a dominant "culture-ideology" (Sklair, 1998, p. 297). The seeding of the unconscious by social processes such as advertising acts to mask the etiology of desire, sexual or otherwise, which underpins consumer culture.

Queer theory has not addressed the attempts at the creation of uniformity in needs and desires. What the history of advertising shows is that you can appeal to the queer community without condoning its behavior. While the human need for community enhances the drive for conformity, the realization of the generalized non-acceptance and "otherness" of queerness fuels arguments for difference as an expression of resistance while, at the same time, it extols the desire to "normalize" and consume, evoking courses of action that often result in the buying of uniforms rather than the celebrating of difference.

Communities, both geographic and spatial, have historically acted as agents of resistance to exogenous forces that would transform their role as centers of daily physical and emotional maintenance for individuals, kinship units and groups. The aim of the capitalist engagement of the social realm, then, is the creation of the ego-centered individual and the destruction of communities as places of mutual support and resistance. In more recent times, transnational corporations have responded to the ability of communities to resist outside domination by actively fighting their influence on social life, and indeed, their very existence. In the face of conflict, they have moved their production to other areas where communities and unions are less organized. In the 1970s, the mass movement of factories around the world to areas where communities did not exist forced wage-seekers to travel to the worksite. The movement of corporations offshore serves to provide, at least initially, resistance-free factories. These are calculated strategies to counter incipient organization.

This separation of worker from both product and community affects every aspect of daily living and emotional life. But there *is* resistance to attempts to destroy solidarity on the part of global forces. *Geographic* communities can even act as barricades against the attempt to enforce hegemony. *Emotional* communities, whether they be produced by similarities based on sex, gender, race, or class, serve as centers of identification, spaces where individuals realize that there are others like themselves and which provide a counter to the alienation caused by re-

jection and discrimination. Communities can thus provide alternatives to the goals of capitalist production.

Jameson has proposed that the concept of alienation in late capitalism has been replaced with fragmentation (1991, p. 14). Fragmentation highlights the increased separation of people from one another and from place that is now occurring. It is located in a generalized and growing lack of cultural affect that distinguishes our present period from our past. Which is not to say, in Jameson's words, that "the cultural products of the postmodern era are utterly devoid of feeling, but rather that such feelings—which it may be better and more accurate, following J.F. Lyotard, to call 'intensities,'—are particularly free flowing and impersonal" (1991, p. 16). Here, many postmodernists and poststructuralists argue, is the disappearance of the individual as subject. Yet what is really completed with this disappearance is the *objectification* of the individual as alone and incomparable. As the *idea* of difference becomes embedded in culture it also becomes more abstract:

What we must now ask ourselves is whether it is precisely this semi-autonomy of the cultural sphere that has been destroyed by the logic of late capitalism. Yet to argue that culture is today no longer endowed with the relative autonomy is once enjoyed as one level among others in earlier moments of capitalism (let alone in precapitalist societies) is not necessarily to imply its disappearance or extinction. Quite the contrary; we must go on to affirm that the autonomous sphere of culture throughout the social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life—from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself—can be said to have become 'cultural' in some original and yet untheorized sense. This proposition is, however, substantially quite consistent with the previous diagnosis of a society of the image or simulacrum and a transformation of the "real" into so many pseudoevents. (Jameson, 1991, p. 48)

The fragmentation of social life repeats itself in the proposal that sexuality and gender are separate and autonomous from bureaucratic state organization. If, as in Jameson's terms, differences can be *equated*, then this should not pose a problem for the mobilization of resistance to inequality. However, as postmodernist and poststructuralist writers assume a position that this equation is impossible and undesirable, then the dominant modes of power will prevail without analysis or opposition. The danger, of course, is that while we concentrate on decentering

identity, we succeed in promoting the very goals of global capitalism that work against the formation of communities or provide the means to destroy those that already exist, and with them, any hope for political action.

For those who are not included in traditional sources of community building—in particular, kinship based groupings—the building of an “affectional community . . . must be as much a part of our political movement as are campaigns for civil rights” (Weeks, 1985, p. 176). This building of communities requires identification. If we cannot recognize traits that form the bases of our relationships with others, how then can communities be built? The preoccupation of Lyotard and Foucault, as examples, with the overwhelming power of “master narratives,” posits a conclusion that emphasizes individual resistance and that ironically, ends up reinforcing the “narrative” itself.

As Ellen Wood (1986) asserts, the production of postmodernist and poststructuralist theory is based on unacknowledged but specific class interests. A class analysis means “a comprehensive analysis of social relations and power . . . based on a historical/materialist principle which places the relations of production at the center of social life and regards their exploitative character as the root of social and political oppression” (Wood, 1986, p. 14). Such an analysis does not mean overlooking “the differences which express the social formation” as Marx put it, nor a mechanistic materialism, but it maintains that oppression finds its most extreme and violent expression through economic exploitation and alienation (Marx, 1978, p. 247; Stabile, 1994, p. 48). Stabile further critiques postmodernist theory as

. . . those forms of critical theory that rely upon an uncritical and idealist focus on the discursive constitution of “the real,” a positivistic approach to the notion of “difference,” and a marked lack of critical attention to the context of capitalism and their own locations within processes of production and reproduction. (1994, p. 52)

She continues, “against the Marxist centrality of class struggle, and in an ironic if unintentional mirroring of the mercurial nature of capitalism, Michel Foucault argues: ‘But if it is against *power* that one struggles, then all those who acknowledge it as intolerable can begin the struggle wherever they find themselves and in terms of their own activity (or passivity).’” (1994, p. 49)

Resistance to capitalism, then, involves practical struggle on issues that affect all of us on an everyday basis. We cannot pretend to disengage from the reality of discrimination or oppression and claim that we are fulfilling a task of resistance by refusing to engage the domination that exists.⁶

The Consequences of Queer Theory

If the tenets of queer theory reject strategies of mobilization for fear of essentializing identity, what then, are its politics? The historical and ethnographic fallacies in defense of postmodernist and poststructuralist critique aside, it is doubtful that queer theory would exist at all without new political juncture that Rorty (1991) and Jameson (1991) both note is being produced in late capitalism, and which Haraway (1985), Eagleton (1986) point to as having led to a new stage of politics.

Be that as it may, “queer” as put forward by queer theorists, has no inherent historical or social context. We continually return to the following question: to whom does it belong and what does it represent? These advocates of “queer” do not acknowledge that *queer* is produced by social relations, and therefore contains the attributes of existing relationships of power.

Legitimization in queer theory means the right to be as one is, a kind of free activity that incorporates gender, sexuality, and individual variants in thought and speech. The problem, of course, lies in the fact that this process of legitimization does not create equality: dominance still exists; ideals still rule the day.

The problem we thus encounter is that the collective level is deemed impossible: the legitimating function is purely personal, the ultimate statement of “the personal as political.” Indeed, when Judith Butler was asked for suggestions on how to proceed in the political arena, she answered:

I actually believe that politics has a character of contingency and context to it that cannot be predicted at the level of theory. And that when theory starts being programmatic, such as “here are my five prescriptions.” And I set up my typology, and my final chapter is called “What is to be Done?”, it pre-empts the whole problem of context and contingency, and I do think that political decisions are made in that lived moment and that they can’t be predicted from the level of theory—they can be prepared for but I suppose I’m with

Foucault on this . . . It seems like a noble tradition.” (Bell, 1999, p. 167)

But context and contingency, and the “lived moment,” are aspects of personal recognition, and a failure to specify leads nowhere. Simply reflection on the success of *movements* around the world and throughout modern history tells us otherwise.

I have argued here that this turn towards the individual, acknowledged or disputed, has led to a disengagement of coalition building and social movements, and the mirroring of the current social conditions of late capitalism, including the renouncing of identity. Indeed, As Butler (1993) has stated, “the prospect of *being* anything, even for pay, has always produced in me a certain anxiety, for ‘to be’ gay, ‘to be’ lesbian seems to be more than a simple injunction to become who or what I already am.” She is therefore

. . . not at ease with lesbian theories, gay theories, for as I’ve argued elsewhere, identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as normalizing categories or oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression. (1993, pp. 307-308)

In contrast to the currents in the development of gay and lesbian studies, the anxiety with categorical identification has been a main current in queer theory, from its beginnings in sex and gender studies to its expansion into the wider cultural realm. The concern is not unfounded. Labeling can become a constricting structure that limits the possibilities of being or becoming, as many queer writers have shown. But one has to wonder, if we do not have rallying points, from where do we fight prejudice and exploitation? Foucault has argued that participating in a homosexual perspective admits a homophobic discourse; yet how do we deny homophobia? Social movements and politics are necessary to counter dominant ideologies and power structures. A perception that we can reject static systems of identity without rejecting all bases for identity, however temporary they may be, is necessary for true resistance and social change. Thus, we can identify *with* social movements rather than simply identifying *as* a particular category.

The recognition of common goals can give rise to an identification based on common purpose. One need not have the same sexual orientation or the same taste in fashion to understand that discrimination exists and therefore to embark on a fight against it together. In a culture where

variants on the norms of gender and sexuality are not fully accepted, those identities constitute a precondition for political action. As Weeks notes,

To argue that 'anything goes' is to fall back on an easy libertarianism which ignores questions of power and the quality of relationships. . . . There exists a plurality of sexual desires, or potential ways of life, and of relationships. A radical sexual politics affirms a freedom to be able to choose between them . . . Identity, may, in the end, be no more than a game, a ploy to enjoy particular types of relationships and pleasures. But without it, it seems, the possibilities of political choice are not increased but diminished. The recognition of "sexual identities," in all their ambivalence, seems to be the precondition for the realization of sexual diversity. (1985, p. 210)

Contrary to the fear that identity limits choice, then, *it is* a choice.

If our goal is to produce a society that accepts difference, welcomes diversity, and champions human rights, how do we get there? Working towards structural change requires strategies for social change, which is what answering the question "what is to be done" entails. We can learn from past successes and analytical mistakes. Just as Oscar Lewis's (1963) belief that the "culture of poverty" could only be broken through intensive psychotherapy ignored the structures that created it, so we too must recognize that the conditions of oppression are not self-generated. Anything else is blaming the victim.

Politics, Theory and Internalized Homophobia

The politics and focus on the self and individual status that queer theory creates has consequences for those who are not in a privileged position and who are able to weather or ignore the acts of physical and emotional abuse that many in de-valued positions experience. Symbolic violence—the sideward glance, the judged interaction—as Patricia Williams (1991) has called it, affects us all. It is mediated by the social position in which one finds oneself (1991, p. 134), and thus to the degree to which it effects the maintenance and experience of every-day life.

If we accept the presumption that alienation and fragmentation are parts of the individual's structural experience in capitalist relations, then the human essence is an abstraction in any individual. In reality, the individual is made up of the ensemble of human relations in which he or

she is a part. If, as Judith Butler contends, “Gender is a norm that can never be fully internalized; ‘the ‘internal’ is a surface signification, and gender norms are finally phantasmatic, impossible to embody” (1991, p. 141), then the reality of alienated gender is impossible to ignore. Gender becomes an unconnected aspect of existence within present-day society, a place that can be designated, but which cannot be fully experienced. We are all then, by definition, marginalized. This marginalization is presented in many ways—but more importantly, it is experienced differentially by class position, race, *and* gender. It is also reinforced by prejudice, stigmatization, and violence. The enormous burden of this position is enacted by the dis-eases of society: economic instability, psychological trauma, and “cures” that blame the victim. In this reality, gender is not performed but real, and, certainly, a queer reality is different from a heterosexual one.

The dominant culture is more than an abstract idea that posits the forces of oppression. It also causes pain. Hate crimes, the high rate of teenage suicide among queers, and job and economic discrimination all lead to psychological states that overshadow any discussion of differences, exclusion, parody and imitation. Further, the exclusion of this reality posits an uncomfortable question about queer theory, and in particular, performativity theory.⁷ If resistance is located in the self, if parody and imitation are deemed subversive, and if this is viewed as more pre-emptive than active community-based resistance, what are the consequences? Consider Butler’s remarks about “coming out”:

The discourse of “coming out” has clearly served its purposes, but what are its risks? And here I am not speaking of unemployment or public attack or violence, which are quite clearly and widely on the increase against those who are perceived as “out” whether or not by their own design. Is the “subject” who is “out” free of its subjection and finally in the clear? Or could it be that the subjection that subjectivates the gay or lesbian subject in some ways continues to oppress, or oppresses most insidiously, once, “outness” is claimed? What or who is it that is “out,” made manifest and fully disclosed, when and if I reveal myself as a lesbian? What is it that is now known, anything? What remains permanently concealed by the very linguistic act that offers of the promise of a transparent revelation of sexuality? Can sexuality even remain sexuality once it submits to a criterion of transparency and disclosure, or does it perhaps cease to be sexuality precisely when the semblance of full explicitness is achieved? Is sexuality of any kind even possible

without the opacity designed by the unconsciousness, which means simply that the conscious “I” who would reveal its sexuality is perhaps the last to know the meaning of what it says? (1993, p. 309)

This statement by Butler, centrally representative of queer theory, begs the question of coming out, while arguing against identity. It also, oddly, makes a case for sexuality as a private affair, fully known only to the self. But what do we know about coming out? Does coming out in New York City or San Francisco have the same consequences as coming out in Kansas City or Paris, Tennessee? Does the coming out process differ by class, race, gender, and status? Does Butler’s contention that coming out continues conceptual problems for the designation of linguistic, unconscious acts have any possible reality for the high school student who is accused of being a fairy and beat up in Nebraska (or anywhere else)? Can queer theory, in this form, be taken seriously anywhere except the most elitist of academic institutions, which by their very existence and nature, represent the arenas of power in American society? Certainly there has been a wide range of popular and scientific writing about coming out that supports the necessity of identity formation for emotional well being. As recent examples of a much larger literature, Rowen and Malcolm (2002) tell us “Typically, the earlier stages of gay/lesbian identity formation (HIF) are fraught with confusion and despair, marked by low self-acceptance and low self-esteem” (Ross and Rosser, 1996). Citing Cass’s (1983) work on identity formation, they make the important point that children in industrialized societies are socialized through the “promotion of an ideal heterosexual image” (Cass, 1983, p. 145), and that therefore, “the process of HIF (homosexual identity formation) is one of change” (2002, p. 79). Importantly, they note that feelings and thoughts of homosexuality occur inwardly, and therefore are significantly prone to the harmful effects of social stigma and prejudice. Likewise, Huebner, Davis, Nemeroff and Aiken (2002) point out that “homosexual identities are formed in the context of extreme cultural stigma towards homosexual behavior” (Troiden, 1989), thus working against standard HIV prevention strategies. It is even possible that unsafe sexual practices are the result of resistance strategies to the normative practices of sexual acts (Kirsch, n.d.). The process of coming out is one of unlearning negative attitudes towards homosexuality. Frable, Wortman and Joseph (1997), show the importance of cultural stigma, personal visibility and community networks on predicting self-esteem and distress in gay men, and Williamson

(2000), McGregor, Carver et al. (2001), and Boatwright, Gilbert, Forrest, and Ketzenberger (1996) review the effects of internalized homophobia on health issues and career trajectories for lesbians and gay men.

Queerness as a deviant form of heterosexuality results in oppression. When this fact is not confronted, it can lead to maladaptive responses that include the markings of internalized homophobia: depression, psychosis, resignation, and apathy. These are very much reactions to the ways in which we view ourselves, which in turn are, at least in part, due to the ways in which we are constantly told to view ourselves. Here, the production of consciousness takes a very concrete form. Those enduring this form of structural violence cannot, even in the academy, simply decide to disengage. We cannot simply refuse to acknowledge these facts of social life in our present society, and hope that our circumstances will change. Although the lack of definition is what has inspired the use of "queer," it cannot, as Butler herself asserts, "overcome its constituent history of injury" (1993, p. 223).

Butler's claim attempts to dissolve sexuality and annuls the basis for sexual identity, precluding a confrontation with a cultural morality that dictates sexual correctness, affirming some practices while stigmatizing others. What is forgotten is that "coming out" identifies our sexuality and gender in the sense of knowing who we are, and to whom we can relate in the larger society. This knowing is impossible without identifying with others engaged in a similar struggle. Since it is, in fact, impossible to constitute a movement for social change without this recognition, we must ask whom this aspect of queer theory benefits. To see one's gender identity as imitation or parody, as, following Butler, queer theory often does, is to view the self as unreal. It distances the actor from a confrontation with the objects of oppression and thwarts any resistance that matters. Individual difference is reified to the exclusion of community. Certainly denying a label or an identity is far easier than a fight for equity that might fail, thus rendering the individual even more isolated. To have a label that is not accepted as equal to others is to be "less-than," producing marginalization and *shame* for those desiring equal status. By denying the identification and the material fact of labeling, it is assumed that shame is avoided and no real resistance is needed. But in fact the individual becomes even more alone. The result is a fear of engagement, a true manifestation of an internalized homophobia that is masked by the individual's refusal to identify and to engage social constructions of power.

Huebner, Davis, Nemeroff, and Ailen (2002) remind us that given the powerful forces of the dominant culture that see homosexuality as

deviant, “internalized homophobia may continue to affect individuals in varying degrees throughout their lives” (2002, p. 330). Given late capitalism’s drive towards individuation and the creation of ideals for consumption, including desire, it becomes even more important that identity, however fluid, act to break the isolation of the individual that the “right to be oneself” engenders.

Community, identity and self-actualization are indeed complementary. Social and emotional health is promoted by active participation with others. Power in numbers has been the call of resistance movements world wide, from anti-colonial movements to calls for better working conditions. Such struggles have larger outcomes. The community is a forum for debate for the construction of strategy. Separatist movements have proven unproductive as the group becomes isolated and involutes with disagreement. Assimilationist movements cannot work towards sustained social change because there is no confrontation with the basis of oppression. The call for individuality, for “self,” is the most harmful strategy of all, for it separates every person from any concrete sense of identity and collective opposition.

CONCLUSION: IDENTIFYING WITH/IDENTIFYING AS

The sense of our own identity is fluid and tolerant, whereas our sense of the identity of others is always more fixed and often edges towards caricature. We know within ourselves that we can be twenty different persons in a single day and that the attempt to explain our personality is doomed to become a falsehood after only a few words. To every remark made about our own personal characteristics, we would want, in the interest of truth, quite disregarding vanity, to say, “yes, but . . .”, or “that may have been true once but it is true no longer” . . . (Wilson, 1990)

The promise of queer theory—and its imagined advance over previous approaches in gay and lesbian studies—is inclusiveness. The paradox of queer theory is that while it strives for this inclusiveness in a manner that identity politics cannot—a laudable goal—the reliance by its practioners on postmodern and poststructuralist theory, the epistemology of which is the negation of political action and the reification of the individual ‘self,’ has made this strategy untenable.

Identifying with social movements in an era of global capitalist accumulation presupposes a recognition that exploitation, prejudice, and violence are facts of everyday life that many experience. It is not necessary to agree with all of the beliefs of your neighbor to establish a mutually supportive alliance. Nor it is necessary to *experience* the reality of your cohorts to identify with common causes. In other words, it is necessary to refocus on practice—unifying and practice—generating principles (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 101). The ability to create a true political movement assumes identification with the struggles and projected outcomes of that movement while recognizing the differences between members that need to be accommodated. The process is liberatory. The characters that Duberman documents in this exposition of Stonewall (1993) all differ in their backgrounds and in their understanding of the world at large. The movement generated by Stonewall cut across class and status, but its general demands were the same for all: an end to discrimination and persecution.

Castells' (1997) notion of project identity is again helpful here in defining the parameters of social movements. The struggles for colonial independence were specifically geared towards the rights of indigenous peoples and gaining freedom from exploitation. The anti-war movement, however much divisiveness it generated, was still focused on the right to self-determination. Past feminist struggles, despite incidents that threatened to destroy basic alliances, pulled together women of differing class, status, race, and sexual orientation. While it has not always been possible for these segments to productively work with each other, there has at least been a common understanding of the goals of liberation.

Hennessy (1994) reasons that true incorporation entails more than the granting of civil rights: "It also requires eliminating the inequities between the haves and the have-nots that allows the tolerance of 'minorities' necessary" (1994, p. 89). The focus on individual and local realities supports a negation of the discussion of larger systemic issues, the "grand narratives" that the postmodernists and poststructuralists would have us dismiss. But as O'Laughlin reminds, a "vulgar materialism" is not the same as a general theory through which to interpret social representations and organization (O'Laughlin, 1975, p. 348). The fact, as Hennessy notices, that any analysis of capitalism is notoriously absent from new social criticism in the postmodernist mode is reason enough to view it with a critical eye. Reflecting on his own participation in gay and lesbian politics, Duberman reflects

It is true that political involvement requires some detachment from self-obsession. But . . . [p]articipation in common struggle with other opens up opportunities that feed the self in unexpected ways. Though political work does demand that we concentrate on the public purpose at hand, it simultaneously provides the individual with the comfort of community and newfound security and confidence. (1996, p. 89)

It is in communities that we *identify with*, support, and build connections, geographic and emotional, with each other. Communities act to connect individuals with the social. They provide the avenues for human social reproduction and serve as the basis for mutual support. Moreover, communities can be sanctuaries for people needing to recover from oppression, and they can provide for collective strategies against those who attempt to destroy and to subjugate their members. Weeks notes that the causes of class struggle, feminism, socialism, and gay and lesbian rights all have their own rhythms that make agreement difficult. Engels' assertion that "in all times of great agitation, the traditional bonds of sexual relations, like all other fetters, are shaken off" (in Weeks, 1985, p. 252) is scarcely borne out in a period in which that agitation is more *between* groups than *against* objects of oppression. This agitation is a choice too. And again, it follows a logic that divides and conquers rather than includes.

The tension between gay and lesbian studies and queer theory represents wider differences in the approach to the analysis of the social, and the individual's relationship to society, including the strategies that derive from those differences. But it should be clear that we cannot struggle alone against a global system of military power and the ever-present threat of economic and physical destruction. If "all things queer," then, is to become anything more than a novel digestion of difference, it must include the individual as more than the self as text. It must accommodate the individual in society. *Identifying with* social movements on the basis of the recognition of exploitation and devaluation, rather than mechanistically deconstructing the identities that comprise subjugated positions, can begin to resolve the stagnation that has dominated attempts to develop coalitions around issues that matter.

NOTES

1. Parts of the present paper were presented in *Queer Theory and Social Change* (Routledge, 2000). While I have sometimes borrowed from my previous introduction of these issues, the debate, of course, is ongoing.

2. Although the use of the terms postmodern and poststructuralism are sometimes differentiated by time, in this paper I combine the use of these descriptors, as is common in much of the writing in queer theory. The differences between postmodern and poststructuralist theories are more methodological than interpretive, Rosenau notes, writing that they are “not identical, they overlap considerably and are sometimes considered synonymous. Few efforts have been made to distinguish between the two, probably because the differences appear to be of little consequence . . . the major difference is one of emphasis more than substance. Postmodernists are more oriented towards cultural critique while the poststructuralists emphasize method and epistemological matters” (Rosenau, 1992, p. 13).

3. Terry Eagleton has made an interesting observation on the conclusions of many European academics during this period. In his words, “. . . *what if this defeat never really happened in the first place?* What if it were less a matter of the left rising up and being forced back, then of a steady disintegration, a gradual failure of nerve, a creeping paralysis? What if the confrontation never quite took place, but people *behaved* as if it did?” (1997, p. 19).

4. Lancaster and Di Leonardo (1997), in their excellent *Gender and Sexuality Reader* (Routledge, 1997), note, “In the course of the 1980s, a substantial current of gender and sexuality studies withdrew to a narrow, disengaged, and frequently idealistic conception of social constructionism. Postmodernism habitually and synecdochically misidentified Marxism and political economy with older, reductionist, mechanistic schools of thought . . . and thus often simply ignored political-economic contexts in their writing. Ironically, it was in the same decade that work in political economy became increasingly historically sophisticated . . . and took on culture, language, race and gender as key analytic categories” (1997, p. 4).

5. Interestingly, Mark Lilla has argued that the beleaguering fact of the holocaust, the failure of post-colonial experiments in Africa and Asia, the collapse of the Soviet bloc, and the aftermath of the struggles of 1968 left French radicals seriously doubting their premises. On the other hand, “These same events have had no appreciable effect on American intellectual life, for the simple reason that they pose no challenge to our own self-understanding. . . . That the anti-humanism and politics of pure will latent in structuralism and deconstruction . . . are philosophically and practically incompatible with liberal principles sounds like an annoying prejudice” (Lilla, 1998, p. 41).

6. See my Chapter Five of *Queer Theory and Social Change*. The preoccupation of poststructuralists with disengagement as an act of resistance, of parody as re-description (cf. Butler, 1993), works against the formation of community just as it (falsely) presents to world *towards* self-actualization. That we are members of a society *should* be self-evident. How power and domination are actualized and maintained through capitalist control is both an empirical and a political question.

7. For a full discussion of performativity, imitation and gender theory, see Butler, 1993, Kirsch, 2000.

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